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AUTHOR	Brody, Lawrence; Marin, Genaro
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ABSTRACT

Results of this study which attempted to determine the main forces which strengthen or weaken college aspirations of students from disadvantaged backgrounds showed that the parents, guidance counselor and teacher were the strongest personal influences. Circumstances more than people tend to lessen the aspirations of the teenagers studied, who were chosen from a college-bound program in New York City. The three chief circumstances were lack of money, fear of failure, and not strong enough motivation. The two main reasons for going to college were relevant to the improvement of their self image and a pragmatic orientation toward a career. Charts are included. (KG)

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68-11

WHY DO TEENAGERS GO TO COLLEGE?

by

Lawrence Brody

and

Genaro Marin

College Discovery and Development Program

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THE PROBLEM

The school drop-out rate remains high nationally. From the drop-out population stems the largest proportion of individuals who join the lines of unemployment, unskilled jobs and delinquency.

At present there are some strong indications of an inverse relationship between unemployment, proportion of low-paid jobs and delinquency and the level of education of the people. Furthermore, there exists a popular belief today that young people must pursue an education not only through high school but beyond.

The prevailing and growing awareness of the need to educate the younger generations has reached national levels. For example, serious attempts have been made to use education as a preventive force to identify and help young children who are socio-economically and educationally deprived (Headstart), or who are potential drop-outs (Upward Bound and College Discovery), or who have dropped out of school, and are poor, unemployed and so unskilled as to be unemployable (Job Corps), or those who have completed high school but whose resources are too limited to permit them to go to college (SEEK). Along the same lines, special programs have been sponsored which aim to train professional personnel to deal effectively with students who are academically and socio-economically underprivileged (e.g. NDEA Counseling and Guidance Institute), or to assist the unemployed in finding adequate training and employment (e.g. Project CAUSE).

As a complement to some of the projects mentioned above, empirical data have shown encouraging results. For instance, Southern Illinois University

conducted two summer programs (1964 and 1965) aimed at the training of employment counselors. Over 120 individuals were readily hired by state employment agencies following training. From other findings, it has been reported that drop-out students tend to improve their reading level at the rate of 1-1/2 years during a six-month period in the Job Corps (Marin, 1967a). The same program (Job Corps) has been found to greatly influence self-image among the poor (Marin, 1967b) and to sharply reduce psycho-social (discipline) problems.

Some of the preliminary findings on the performance of College Discovery and Upward Bound students also indicate that some remedial educational and counseling programs produce observable improvements in performance and behavior of teenagers who have been borderline, prospective drop-outs (Tanner and Lachica, 1966, Marin, 1968). Along the same line, Gottlieb (1967) reported that lower class culture does not appear to have a built-in set of values that discourage social mobility. As a matter of fact "these youths aspire to a style of life that resembles that of the middle class", although some authors allege that education is a built-in middle class value.

While adults are seemingly preoccupied with teenagers' education beyond high school, one may ask are the teenagers equally motivated toward or preoccupied with the same issue?

Little is known about the motivations which take teenagers to college. It is only known that the economic background is an important variable in determining who does go to college (Berdie, 1954; Educational Testing Service, 1957). It seems that the socio-economic level of the student's family is so important that the majority of drop-outs from college come from the lower socio-economic class. But, on the other hand, other authors have rendered inconclusive reports. Schroeder and Sledge (1966) indicated that "personal motivation" factors appeared to be more important determinants for college achievement than the straight socio-economic means of the family. In a

recent article (Brody, 1967) noted that our society has ascribed so many negative connotations to the poor that poor youths are looked upon with suspicion as if poverty were a synonym for delinquency. Brody found that when poor youths who are underachievers are given educational opportunities which broaden their experiential world, these youths respond with strong and observable motivations toward high school achievement, toward self image and toward future educational goals. Other authors have found that the prediction of the occupational status can be better understood as well as less tangible factors such as community orientation. Health and Strowitz (1967) reported that "family background factors and aspiration levels are not as important in predicting occupational status as are further education and training, high school achievement, and community of orientation in a highly industrialized urban technocracy." The studies mentioned above do not enlighten our understanding of the motivations or forces which facilitate going to college or joining the world of work or unemployment among teen-agers. This has been pointed out by contemporary theories of vocational development (Super and Bacharach, 1957; Tiedeman, 1961; Holland, 1964). According to these authors the "processes engaged in by an individual in selecting a career interact in sequential and complex ways over a long period of time" (Thoresen and Mehrens, 1967). This issue is further emphasized by Samler (1964) who holds that the principles of career development are not yet known. Because of this marked lack of knowledge of the principles of career development, Thoresen and Mehrens (1967) stated that "the understanding of the specifics of how an individual makes choices and plans remains obscure."

We certainly live in a work-oriented society. The adults around the child repeatedly confound him with "what are you going to be when you grow up?" This pressure is so intense that by the time the individual reaches

adolescence he feels as if he must be deeply committed to become "something", a worker, technician or specialist of some sort or be considered a freak of nature. It is then as early as adolescence when the individual is confronted with either going on to college or else, "work".

At present, however, large groups of teenagers are taking alternatives other than either college or work. One example of this is the large number of runaway youngsters, such as the Hippies who supposedly rebel against all the pressures stemming from home, school, church and other institutions which they found to be a drag.

It is possible then that going to college is a matter of an externalized choice rather than an underlying motivation common to all teenagers. It may be that a proportion far smaller than our present social expectation actually wants and can successfully attend college.

Obviously, very little is known about the motivations which distinguish the college goers from the non-college goers. Is going to college a central concern among high school students? If so, what are the strongest reasons (motivations) for pursuing a college education? What forces influence a choice between college and other alternatives? The present study constitutes a preliminary attempt to seek answers to some of these important questions, particularly as they may shed some light on the issues of education for the disadvantaged student.

METHOD

Subjects

90 students currently enrolled in a college-bound program of a New York City high school participated as subjects in this investigation. These students had been selected as candidates who could, with the help of a reinforced

curriculum program, graduate from high school and, possibly, reach a level of personal development and academic achievement acceptable for college admission. All the subjects came from socio-economically disadvantaged homes.

Procedure

The students were given a specially devised questionnaire and were instructed, by their own teachers, not to sign their names and record only their spontaneous and honest reactions or answers to the questions presented. All the students took the same instrument in one day, in groups not larger than 20 students at a time.

Instrument

A questionnaire was created specifically for this study. It was entitled "Why Do Teenagers Go To College?" and contained the following items or prompters: 1) I think that most students who go on to college do so because; 2) In my opinion, teenagers do not go to college because ..; 3) In my opinion, five advantages of going to college could be the following..; 4) In my opinion, five disadvantages of going to college are ...

In a separate section the questionnaire required for the student to make a check mark (✓) on a point in a four-point scale which indicated the amount of influence (very much, some, little, and none) that some particular persons have on "a student's decision to go to college." Conversely, the questionnaire also required that the students indicated on a similar scale the amount of influence (very much, some, little, and none) which some particular persons have on "a student's decision not to go to college."

The last two sections of the questionnaire called for the student's

indication of the amount of influence which particular circumstances had on the student's college aspirations or on his decision to choose a path other than college.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data are presented in five categories, as follows:

1. People who are reported by respondents as having most influence on positive student aspiration for college.
2. Circumstances reported as positively influencing aspiration for college.
3. People reported as most influential in producing negative aspiration with regard to college education.
4. Circumstances reported as most influential in producing negative college aspiration.
5. Student's written responses to open-ended questionnaire items concerning college aspirations among teenagers.

Table 1, below, shows the amount of influence which relatives and other adults were reported to have on the student's aspiration to pursue an education in college:

TABLE 1

STUDENT'S ASPIRATIONS TO GO TO COLLEGE
AS INFLUENCED POSITIVELY BY OTHER PEOPLE

Variable	Very Influential	
	Number	Percent
Father	54	(60)
Mother	51	(57)
Guidance Counselor	39	(43)
Teacher	34	(39)
Older Friends	20	(22)
Religious Counselor	20	(22)
Brother	12	(13)
Sister	9	(10)
Distant Relatives	9	(10)
Peers	7	(8)
Own Initiative	5	(6)
Boy/Girl Friend	1	(1)

When the category "Very Influential" was considered by the students, father (60%), mother (57%), guidance counselor (43%), and teacher (39%) - in that order - were reported as having a definite influence on student's positive college aspirations. Religious counselors and older friends were reported as having a strong influence by (22%) of the subjects.

In the light of the frequent mentions in the literature of fatherless homes, it is interesting to note that a very small difference was found

between the influence that mother and father were reported to have on the aspirations of the teenage group studied. It is of some interest that very little differential margin was reported concerning the influence that the teacher and the guidance counselor have on these students' college aspirations. Furthermore, parents, teachers and counselors appear to be more influential in the aspirations of the population studied than older friends and peers. This may possibly be a significant finding as it runs contrary to assertions regarding the peer pressure over home and school influences among middle class teenagers who go on to college. Whether this finding is an artifact of this sample could not be determined and remains to be investigated.

Positive Circumstantial Influences

It is commonly believed that life circumstances bear some positive influence in the students' aspirations with regards to college pursuits. Table 2, below, shows the students' reported views on this subject:

TABLE 2

CIRCUMSTANCES INFLUENCING THE STUDENTS' ASPIRATION TO GO TO COLLEGE

Variable	Very Much	
	No.	Percent
Desire/Motivation	67	(74)
Money	63	(70)
Talent/Ability	51	(57)
Job	45	(50)
Expectation of Success	33	(37)
Marriage	30	(33)
Health	17	(19)

From the results it appears that desire or motivation (74%) and money (70%) are the overriding circumstances which affect positive college aspirations among these students from underprivileged backgrounds. This finding is nothing new but a factual support to the reality from which these students come, namely, shortage of money and a strong motivation to move ahead.

It is also interesting to observe that talent or ability is also considered very influential among these students. Having a job as a means of supporting oneself was also rated as an important factor among these students. Expectation of success, marriage and health were rated as less influential than the other above mentioned variables. These were probably viewed as less conducive to inspiring hopes to continue an education beyond the high school program.

People Who Lessen The Student's College Aspirations

It is possible for teenagers from the culture of poverty to aspire to directions in life other than college as a result of their experiential transactions with particular relatives or other adults. Table 3 summarizes respondents' reports of adults who are most influential in producing negative student aspirations for college.

TABLE 3

PEOPLE WHO LESSEN THE STUDENT'S COLLEGE ASPIRATIONS

Person	Amount of Influence	
	Number	Percent
Mother	26	(29)
Father	22	(24)
Guidance Counselor	14	(16)
Teacher	12	(13)
Peers	9	(10)
Older Friends	7	(8)
Religious Counselor	5	(6)
Sister	5	(6)
Brother	4	(4)

Less than one-third of the population studied considered their relatives and other people as having a negative influence on their aspirations toward a college education. Again, the home influence was expressed as more predominant than the other variables studied. Apparently, the mother has a slightly greater influence than the father on the student's aspirations concerning a career or vocation other than a college pursuit. The influence of school personnel-counselor and teacher-follows that of the home of the student. This is in line with current guidance and teaching practices in which both the guidance counselor and the teacher tend to advise the students as to their good or poor chances in college.

The depressed nature of the student's responses (small n) offers support to the situation surrounding the sample studied. Since the student has remained in school, e.g., 10th-12th grade, it is likely that he has the desire to complete the program. Furthermore, all the students in the sample

studied belonged in a reinforced program offered only to those individuals who had some potential for completion of the high school studies and possibly to go on to college. The findings in the present study simply lend support to the screening of the candidates who were, by and large, encouraged to go on to college rather than discouraged from doing so by their parents, counselors and teachers, and to a lesser extent by their own peer group, religious leaders and other adults.

Circumstances Which Lessen The Student's College Aspirations

Sometimes it is not people but circumstances that decrease college aspirations among teenagers. It is, then, in view of these circumstances that they begin to decide in favor of other directions in life. Table 4, below, summarizes responses relevant to those circumstances which produce negative aspirations for college study.

TABLE 4

CIRCUMSTANCES REPORTED TO LESSEN A STUDENT'S COLLEGE ASPIRATIONS

Variable	Amount of Influence	
	No.	Percent
Money	56	(62)
Fear of Failure	51	(57)
Motivation	46	(51)
Marriage	38	(42)
Talent or Ability	36	(40)
Job	34	(38)
Sickness	33	(37)

N = 90

All the variables listed above apparently affected the student's aspirations to a considerable extent. Circumstances dealing with money were thought by respondents to be the highest contributors to the lessening of the student's college aspirations, which is an understandable phenomenon among the impoverished population studied.

It is very interesting to observe that the fear of failure was the second highest circumstantial force restraining the aspirations of the students. Again, this finding is quite important: it can be viewed as one underlying source of the poor motivation and scholastic apathy frequently reported for disadvantaged students. About half the population studied considered that most teenagers do not pursue college careers because they lack strong motivation. These motivational aspects can be explained in the light of the other variables studied.

The other circumstantial aspects studied also seemed to be important for over one-third of the population. Marriage, doubts about one's own talent or ability, job, and sickness were thought to affect the possibility for a decision to continue studies beyond the high school classrooms.

Students' Reactions to Open-Ended Statements

The students were presented with four open-ended situations to which they were to write their spontaneous opinions. These open-ended statements were as follows:

1. I think that most students who go on to college do so because ....;
2. In my opinion, teenagers do not go to college because .....;
3. In my opinion, five advantages of going to college could be the following .....;
4. In my opinion, five disadvantages of going to college are .....;

It should be pointed out that most students wrote less than ten reasons to explain items 1 and 2 and less than five to answer items 4 and 5. It is

from the total number of responses emitted that some assumptions have been made concerning the students' perception of the motivations, advantages and/or disadvantages related to a college education.

1. Reasons for Going to College: The students produced a total of 328 responses to the open-ended statement "I think that most students who go on to college do so because..." From the gamut of the content of these statements several themes were quite evident. Individual statements were then grouped according to the main idea expressed by the students, as follows:

   Group I: the improvement of one's self image,

   Group II: pragmatic self-improvement,

   Group III: development of interpersonal relationships,

   Group IV: outer-directed image improvement,

   Group V: broadening horizons (experience, fun, curiosity)

   Group VI: alternative/escape

   Group VII: Why not?

   Group VIII: help and/or lead others

The various responses of the students, were, therefore, analyzed in the light of the above eight categories. Table 5, below, shows the percentage of occurrence of responses clearly subsumable under these categories.

TABLE 5

DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSES: REASONS FOR GOING TO COLLEGE

Group	Number of Responses	Percent
I	100	30.5
II	117	35.7
III	24	7.3
IV	29	8.8
V	12	3.6
VI	20	6.1
VII	11	3.3
VIII	15	4.5

Two-thirds of the responses fall in the categories I and II, the improvement of one's own image and pragmatic self-improvement. This is an indication of the awareness that teenagers from culturally disadvantaged backgrounds have of their image as human beings and their need to improve pragmatically. As an illustration of the issues relevant to the topics listed above, some of the most typical responses are now presented.

I. The Improvement of One's Own Image (30.5%)

1. to further education.
2. to find a goal.
3. to develop a philosophy to get through life.
4. to attain status.
5. to feel independent.

II. Pragmatic Self Improvement (35.7%)

1. to reach a specific career goal.
2. for a higher level and/or wider variety of occupations.
3. high salary.
4. learn a business or profession.

III. Development of Interpersonal Relationships (7.3%)

1. to meet a mate or sweetheart.
2. to join friends who are going.
3. to meet friends.
4. to meet brighter or better people.

IV. Outer-Directed Image Improvement (8.8%)

1. to oblige parents' pride, to satisfy parents.
2. to rival older siblings or parents.
3. to see if they can make it and to show others that they can.
4. to do the "in" thing.
5. to be able to say that they went.

V. Broadening Horizons (Experience/Fun/Curiosity) (3.6%)

1. to spend the time.
2. to have fun.
3. to get a new view of life.
4. to see what college is like.

VI. Alternative/Escape (6.1%)

1. to beat the draft.
2. to leave home and/or parents.
3. to stay sheltered for another four years.

VII. Why not? (3.3%)

1. to use the money wisely (if there's money, why not?).

2. to take advantage of the awarded scholarship.

3. because grades were high enough, and one could go.

VIII. Help and/or Lead Others (4.5%)

1. to improve the next generation.

2. to become a leader.

3. to be able to help parents.

4. to become better citizens.

5. to do more for their future family.

Analysis of responses made it apparent that the students had a high regard for a college education, that they saw it as a means of acquiring a more dignified life career with a better salary and more social prestige. Although these are social rewards much publicized on radio and television, they do point out, however, that the individuals in this study were primarily concerned with college education as something which had internal value for them, as an avenue to the improvement of the self-image, as it were. Only to a lesser degree did factors such as sibling rivalry or the satisfaction of parents' pressure enter the picture as strong motivations. In other words, they thought that teenagers themselves valued college, and that other forces such as 'to see what college is like,' 'to gain more experience,' or 'to have fun' were present only minimally.

A number of responses related to use of college study as a means of escaping either home pressures or the draft; this would seem to corroborate frequent expressions in the literature of presently increasing tensions among teenagers.

CONCLUSIONS

This study constituted a preliminary attempt to obtain a close picture of some of the main forces -- people and circumstances -- which strengthen and/or weaken the college aspirations of students from under-privileged backgrounds. The findings can be summarized as follows:

1. The parents, the guidance counselor and the teacher constitute the two strongest influences in the college aspirations of the sample studied. Slightly more influence was ascribed to the father as opposed to the teacher. Older friends and religious counselors were less influential than the above.
2. The students' aspirations to pursue a college education are strongly marked by circumstances contingent on personal desire or motivation, his perception of the availability of money, talent or ability and the existence of a job.
3. The significant people around the students generally do not discourage them from pursuing a college career. When college aspirations of these students are thwarted, mother, father, guidance counselor and teacher -- in that order -- tend to have so influenced the student's college aspirations.
4. The strength of home -- parents more than any other relatives -- and school -- guidance counselor and teacher -- is a more determining factor in the pursuit of a college career than religious counselors, older friends, peers, girl or boy friends of these students.
5. Circumstances more than people tend to lessen the college aspirations of the teenagers studied. The three top circumstances were lack of money, fear of failure and a not strong enough motivation.

6. The two top reasons for going to college, as expressed by the students in this project were relevant to the improvement of their self-image and a pragmatic self-improvement in the light of the reality in which they live.

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